IUCN SSC PSG SGA Statement on the Translocation of Great Apes from Zoos to African Great Ape Range States

Section on Great Apes, IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group

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The Section on Great Apes (SGA) of the IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group, a team of experts engaged in research, management, monitoring and conservation of great apes, provides this position statement to guide decisions on safe translocation of great apes that improve the conservation of great apes in the wild while posing minimal risk to resident wild populations of conspecifics and sympatric great ape species, other wildlife and humans.

We recognize the important role of ex situ (outside great ape range countries) zoo populations in the reintroduction, reinforcement and other conservation translocations to re-establish or recover some imperilled species. However, translocating great apes from ex situ zoo populations into wild great ape habitats poses risks with potentially serious negative consequences to wild great apes (conspecifics and other great ape species) that exceed potential conservation benefits.

Conservation translocations by definition have as their primary purpose the protection of existing wild populations, ecosystems and natural processes (IUCN/SSC 2013). The IUCN general guidelines for conservation translocations, and for great ape translocations specifically, stipulate that releases should not endanger wild great apes (conspecifics or sympatric) by posing risks of disease transmission, negative genetic effects of hybridization, or increased pressure on the social functions and use of resources by wild populations (Beck et al. 2007; IUCN/SSC 2013). Additionally, the primary concerns of a conservation translocation are conservation of the taxon and its wild populations, and these outweigh considerations about individuals in captivity. Improving the welfare of individual great apes in captivity is not in itself adequate justification for translocation. On the contrary, translocations may instead cause marked harms to wild conspecific populations and individuals as well as decreased welfare of the released individuals.

We recommend that great apes from ex situ zoo populations not be considered for translocation into wild great ape ranges at this time for the following reasons:

Firstly, reinforcing wild populations through translocation of formerly captive great apes is not a priority for the conservation of any great ape species or subspecies at this point. Translocations do not address the most urgent conservation needs, namely: preventing loss, fragmentation and degradation of natural habitats; protecting wild populations from killing, capture, trade and consumption; and preventing disease transmission (e.g., Estrada et al. 2017; Strindberg et al. 2018; Santika et al. 2022).

Wildlife populations reach carrying capacity of the habitats they occupy unless habitat conditions are inadequate or unfavourable for population growth (Moehrenschlager et al. 2013). Given adequate protection, great ape populations that have been reduced to below carrying capacity in the past, such as the Virunga gorillas, can recover from threats that depressed survival or birth rates (Granjon et al. 2020; Hickey et al. 2020). Suitable habitats that are not already occupied and that are adequately protected from hunting and habitat degradation are very limited.

Should translocation become a future conservation priority for great ape conservation, there are already significant numbers of formerly wild great apes rescued from illegal trade living in sanctuaries in their range states, and more than there is currently capacity to translocate or introduce them into (Sherman et al. 2020; Caurant 2024). Many of these sanctuaries are already overcapacity. It would thus be a conservation and welfare imperative to prioritize these individuals for release into local wild populations with shared genetic and cultural traits if reinforcement of these wild populations becomes a necessity.

Wild-born great apes have significant advantages over captive-born individuals in terms of behavioural adaptation and early experience. Also, individuals in range-state sanctuaries will have antibodies and resistance to diseases present in natural habitats that zoo-born individuals will not have acquired. From both a health and welfare standpoint, translocation of zoo-born great apes poses unacceptably high risks to the released individuals, which have had no exposure to the pathogens circulating in the wild.

Secondly, even wild populations that have decreased or are below carrying capacity would not necessarily benefit from reinforcement by individuals from ex situ zoos. The risks of translocating zoo individuals into Endangered and Critically Endangered wild populations are simply too great. Great apes are particularly susceptible to communicable diseases of human origin, and captive great apes contract human pathogens due to their close contact with caregivers and other people (Dunay et al. 2018; Devaux et al. 2019). Further, great apes from ex situ populations host microbiomes (gut, oral, skin) that are different from their wild great ape counterparts. Consequently, releasing captive-born individuals into wild great ape habitats can expose resident populations to significant health risks (Kaur et al. 2008; Köndgen et al. 2008; Schaumburg et al. 2012; Patrono et al. 2022; Gogarten et al. 2024).

Adding individuals to a group or community could create social disruption or exacerbate competition among resident great apes, or between the wild and released apes, including aggressive behaviours and lethal attacks (Goossens et al. 2005). Sympatric great ape species could also be affected as they would face the same risks as conspecifics, with the additional threat of lethal interspecies aggression (e.g., coalitionary attacks by chimpanzees on gorillas, as per Southern et al. 2021).

Thirdly, although translocating captive animals into the native range of their taxon is often seen as an opportunity to afford them improved welfare and a better “free” life, in fact released individuals can suffer much diminished welfare or death. Some released great apes have failed to thrive when released into unsuitable habitats or without adequate support, or when they did not have the physical, psychological or social skills to adapt to natural conditions (e.g., Grundmann 2006; Sherman et al. 2020). Zoo-born individuals would likely be even more disadvantaged in their capacity to adapt natural conditions. Others have died in aggressive interactions with wild conspecifics or with sympatric great ape species. For

example, released male chimpanzees died following encounters with wild conspecifics exacerbated by competition over resources (Goossens et al. 2005). Ex-captive great apes who do not fear humans are more likely to pose a threat to humans, and thus be at greater risk of being captured or killed (Hockings & Humle 2009; McLennan & Hockings 2016; Beck 2019).

Based on these considerations, we strongly recommend against translocation of great apes from zoos or other ex situ facilities. We urge the zoo community, and indeed all great ape conservation practitioners and funders, to prioritize support for activities that directly address the most urgent needs for the survival of wild great apes and their habitats: ending illegal hunting, trade and use of great apes; halting habitat destruction and fragmentation; and protecting and restoring the habitats within great apes' native ranges. The SGA is committed to monitoring the status of great ape populations and their habitats, and the effectiveness of conservation actions to protect them. This policy will be reconsidered if and when situations arise wherein translocation of ex situ individuals would likely provide conservation benefits to the great ape taxa.

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